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# *Iamblichus' investiture of Pythagoras.<sup>1</sup>*

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*Abstract:* The paper draws a parallel between Iamblichus' presentation of Pythagoras in the first lines of *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*, and Aristotle's presentation of Thales in *Metaphysics A*. Although the texts present two different accounts of the origins of philosophy, they nevertheless feature strong parallels such as the Greek formulation used to invest the two philosophers with the role of *πρῶτος εὐρετής*. Consequently, Iamblichus seems to exploit the Aristotelian pattern in order to re-locate the discipline of philosophy within the divine domain so to allow and legitimate the foundation of his peculiar declension of Pythagoreanism.

*Keywords:* Iamblichus; *On the Pythagorean Way Of Life*; Pythagoras; Pythagoreanism; Aristotle's *Metaphysics A*.

## 1. *Introduction*

At the start of every philosophical investigation, it is after all the custom, at least for all who are sound-minded, to invoke God. But at the outset of that philosophy rightly believed to be named after the divine Pythagoras, it is surely all the more fitting to do this; for since this philosophy was at first handed down by the gods, it cannot be comprehended without the gods' aid.<sup>2</sup>

Right from the beginning of the *VP*, Iamblichus defines philosophy as strictly

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<sup>1</sup> This paper arose out of my master's dissertation, and I would like to thank Emidio Spinelli, my MA and BA supervisor in Rome, for having encouraged me to work with this material. I also want to thank Angela Ulacco, who provided useful comments on an early draft. Lastly, my greatest thanks go to Phillip Horky, my PhD supervisor in Durham, who has continuously followed the development of this paper and provided me with helpful suggestions and guidance. Obviously, the responsibility for any misuse of their ideas is my own. The final version of this paper was completed in Durham, funded by a Northern Bridge Doctoral Studentship.

<sup>2</sup> Iambl., *VP* §1, 1-6. Translation by J. M. Dillon and J. Hershbelle (1991: 31). Throughout the paper, all the passages from Iamblichus' *VP* will be quoted, when not explicitly stated, according to Dillon's and Hershbelle's translation. In like manner, the edition of the Greek refers to the text of L. Deubner, emended by U. Klein (1975), used by J. M. Dillon and J. Hershbelle (1991) as well.

interrelated with the divine realm and with the gods.<sup>3</sup> This connection is at play especially when dealing with that philosophy named after Pythagoras, who is associated, already from the second line, with the adjective θεῖος. Despite this privileged connection, it may be noted when considering these lines that Iamblichus does not seem to identify all philosophy as ‘Pythagorean’.<sup>4</sup> Even though other philosophies are not here explicitly presented, it seems plausible to say that the straight and direct link with the gods that Pythagoreanism has is intended to show the nobility of this philosophy and to distinguish it from other declensions.

As these lines represent the opening of the *VP*, I take them to be of particular interest for two reasons. Firstly, we should bear in mind that the *VP* was intended to be the first book of a larger collection of nine or ten books<sup>5</sup> and, as such, a protreptic and introductory role can be reasonably attached to it.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, I agree with O’Meara,<sup>7</sup> Brisson and

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<sup>3</sup> Many scholars draw attention to the closeness of these first lines with Plato, *Timaeus* 27c 1-3: ἄλλ’, ὃ Σώκρατες, τοῦτό γε δὴ πάντες ὅσοι καὶ κατὰ βραχὺ σωφροσύνης μετέχουσιν, ἐπὶ παντός ὁρμῇ καὶ σμικροῦ καὶ μεγάλου πράγματος θεὸν αἰεὶ πρὸς καλοῦσιν, ‘Of course, Socrates: anyone with even a slight amount of sense always calls on the gods at the start of any enterprise, great or small’, transl. by R. Waterfield (2008: 16). See e.g., J. M. Dillon and J. Hershbell (1991: 31 n.1), L. Brisson and A. P. Segonds (2011: 157 n.1).

<sup>4</sup> Iamblichus underlines that the invocation of the gods is ‘all the more fitting’ in the case of that philosophy named after Pythagoras. Also, most of the formulations seem to indicate the reference to *this kind of* philosophy. See Iambl., *VP* §1, 1, 2-3: ἐπὶ δὲ τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ Πυθαγόρου [...] νομιζομένη contrapposed to ἐπὶ πάσας μὲν φιλοσοφίας, *VP* §1, 1, 1; *VP*, §1, 4 αὐτῆς παραδοθείσης; *VP* §1, 2, 4-5 τὴν αἴρησιν ταύτην. Lastly, both J. M. Dillon and J. Hershbell (1991: 31) and L. Brisson and A. P. Segonds (2011: 7), go in this direction by deciding to translate *VP* §1, 2, 11: πατέρα τῆς θείας φιλοσοφίας respectively with ‘father of *this* divine philosophy’ and ‘père de *cette* philosophie’ (emphasis is mine), rather than ‘father of *the* divine philosophy’. For the sake of completeness, the Italian translations – M. Giangiulio (1991: 117) and F. Romano (2006: 81) – opt for this second formulation: ‘padre della divina filosofia’.

<sup>5</sup> Even though the pinax in manuscript F lists the titles of nine books, it is reasonable to believe that the collection was composed by ten books. For more detailed information on the topic, see D. O’Meara (1990: 33-35), L. Brisson and A. P. Segonds (2011: xiii-xvi).

<sup>6</sup> I believe this possibility obtains a stronger justification if one decides to analyse the books of *On Pythagoreanism* in parallel with the fragments of Iamblichus’ commentaries on the Platonic dialogues, collected by J. M. Dillon (1973). Dillon shows how the reading of the Platonic dialogues, according to Iamblichus, had to follow a precise order. The canonical order counted two different cycles of reading; the first one counted ten dialogues - *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Philebus* - to instruct the reader in every branch of philosophy, while the second included two dialogues only (*Timaeus* and *Parmenides*), which summarized what studied before (τὸν μὲν Τίμαιον ἐπὶ πᾶσι τοῖς φυσικοῖς τὸν δὲ Παρμενίδην τοῖς θεολογικοῖς, anonym., *Prolegomena* 26, 5). Proclus (*In Alc.*, 13, 17) reports, about the *Alcibiades I*: ‘and indeed it seems to me that it is for this reason that the divine Iamblichus allotted it the first place among the ten dialogues in which he conceives the whole philosophy of Plato to be contained, their entire subsequent development being anticipated as it were in seminal form in this dialogue’ transl. by Dillon (1973: 73). As stated in the testimony, the dialogue deserved to be read in the first place because it anticipated the content of the following ones. I believe it is reasonable to suppose this hermeneutical criterion is at work in *On Pythagoreanism* as well, in which *VP* § 1-2 functions analogously to *Alcibiades I*.

<sup>7</sup> D. O’Meara (1990: 35).

Segonds,<sup>8</sup> and Giangiulio<sup>9</sup> in taking §1 and §2 as the *Introduction* not only of *VP*, but of the whole collection *On Pythagoreanism*.<sup>10</sup> In this perspective, these lines perform a crucial role in relation to the other books of *On Pythagoreanism*. Accordingly, if we take these lines to be a manifesto, a detailed analysis of their structure and topics can shed light on the entire collection.

Certainly, Iamblichus' is neither the only account of the origins of philosophy, nor yet the most famous, in antiquity. Meanwhile, the attention paid in characterizing Pythagorean philosophy as *that* philosophy closely associated with the gods and the divine raises some questions. Does this depiction of Pythagoreanism conceal precise intentions of the writer, or does it just convey the image of Pythagoreanism at Iamblichus' time? A third option needs to be considered as well. Is it possible that when Iamblichus advances his own account of the origins of philosophy, he sees it in a dialectic with a prior paradigm? If so, what can the relationship between this account and that which it imitates be? Lastly, the motif of the gods handing down wisdom to mankind cannot be considered original for obvious reasons. This means that Iamblichus, as often noted for other texts,<sup>11</sup> is here assembling pre-existing material. What material is Iamblichus

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<sup>8</sup> L. Brisson and A. P. Segonds (2011: 153 n.49).

<sup>9</sup> M. Giangiulio (1991: 117 n.1).

<sup>10</sup> As for the title of the collection, I use the English title chosen by D. O'Meara (1990). As it is known, the text wasn't transmitted with one title only. Though most of the scholars tend to agree on 'Ἡ τῶν Πυθαγορείων δογμάτων συναγωγή, I agree with O'Meara (1990) that *Περὶ τῆς Πυθαγορικῆς αἰδέσεως* is equally if not more attractive. As this context doesn't allow a further investigation on the topic, I will limit the discussion to a few considerations. Firstly, at a provisional stage of analysis, it appears that Iamblichus regularly refers to Pythagoreanism as a *αἵρεσις* (this happens already from the first paragraph of the *VP*. See, e.g. also *VP*, 31, §192, 1; 34, §241, 8; 35, §251, 7; *Protr.* 8, 4; 24. 17. For the sake of completion, there are occurrences of other terms referred to Pythagoreanism, e.g. *VP*, index., 15.1 *ἀγωγή*, but a complete account would require a comprehensive investigation). Secondly, the term *αἵρεσις* started to connote, in the Hellenistic period, the choice of an ideal of life oriented through a determined set of principles coherently applied also at a practical level. With this meaning, the term would be more widely consistent with the whole collection of books, presented as a guide not only to Pythagorean doctrines, but also to a Pythagorean life. Finally, the title would be coherent with Iamblichus' idea of the wise sage, who combines a practical (theurgical) and theoretical life. On Iamblichus' construction of a Pythagorean identity with the statute of *αἵρεσις*, see also C. Macris (2009).

<sup>11</sup> This aspect of Iamblichus' text composition, together with his interest in theurgy, drew the criticism of many scholars. See, e.g. A. Charles-Saget (1997). The scholarly opinion on Iamblichus' philosophy before the 1970s can be summarised by B. D. Larsen's words: 'Jamblique représente la période décadente du néo-platonisme où le travail philosophique se désagrège en subtilités et en arguties scolastiques et est remplacé par une religiosité et une mystique fanatiques et pleines de spéculations, dont l'intérêt principal se porte sur les religions étrangères et le culte, en insistant sur les initiations et la théurgie, c.à.d. sur des actes du culte dont le but principal est d'influencer les puissances supérieures. La vie intellectuelle grecque serait ici tellement éloignée de sa ligne originelle qu'elle n'aurait plus le droit de retenir notre attention', B. D. Larsen (1972: 21-22). For more detailed information about the studies on Iamblichus' until the 1970s, see S. Gersh (1978); for a review of more modern studies, see L. I. Martone (2012: 103-107).

drawing from and why was it chosen?

In order to respond to the questions just raised, this paper will be divided into four main sections. The first section will consider the content and structure of §1 and §2, trying to point out the materials and topics selected by Iamblichus; the second section will investigate Aristotle's presentation of Thales as the *fons et origo* of philosophy in *Metaphysics* A,<sup>12</sup> what is usually considered the most important account of the origins of philosophy from antiquity; the third section will compare these origin accounts in parallel; lastly, the fourth section will test conclusions drawn from these comparisons against other passages of the *VP*.

### 1.1. On the Pythagorean Way of Life, §1 and §2.

At the start of every philosophical investigation, it is after all the custom, at least for all who are sound-minded, to invoke God. But at the outset of that philosophy rightly believed to be named after the divine Pythagoras, it is surely all the more fitting to do this; for since this philosophy was at first handed down by the gods, it cannot be comprehended without the gods' aid. Moreover, its nobility and greatness exceed human ability to understand it immediately: only when the goodwill of the gods leads the way, can someone with gradual approach slowly appropriate something from it. From all these reasons, then, invoking the gods as leaders, and entrusting ourselves and our discourse to them, let us follow wherever they lead, in no way discouraged by the long time this philosophical school has been neglected, concealed by outlandish teachings and secret codes obscured by numerous false and spurious treatises, and entangled in many other similar difficulties. For us the will of the gods is sufficient, with which we can endure even more difficult circumstances than these. And after the gods, we shall choose as our leader, the founder and father of this divine philosophy. But let us first, by way of preliminaries, say something about his family and country.<sup>13</sup>

As previously noted, the reference to the divine is primary. The invocation of the gods precedes everything else and is described as customarily appropriate for wise people. The reason for this is explained by the following sentences. Firstly, as Pythagorean philosophy is a gift from the gods, the only way to grasp it is by means of the gods themselves.<sup>14</sup> The theme of a divine transmission of wisdom has many precedents that, unfortunately, cannot

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<sup>12</sup> Arist., *Metaph.* A 3, 983 b18 – 984 a5.

<sup>13</sup> Iambl., *VP* §1-2.

<sup>14</sup> The French and Italian translations are closer to the Greek in translating: 'par l'entremise des dieux' L. Brisson and A. P. Segonds (2011: 7), and 'per il tramite di', M. Giangiulio (1991:117), by means of the gods; A full comprehension of this facet would probably require a more comprehensive discussion of Iamblichus' thought, in which philosophy and theurgy characterise two sides of the same coin.

be examined in detail here. Just to give an immediate example of Platonic/Pythagorean inspiration, one can mention Numenius' fragment on the transmission of knowledge,<sup>15</sup> which, in turn, refers to Plato's *Philebus*.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Iamblichus is drawing on material that has already been appropriated by a Platonic/Pythagorean tradition,<sup>17</sup> in order to build a chain of transmission of wisdom that originates in the gods. Moreover, the passage features some important parallels<sup>18</sup> with the introductory sections of *On the mysteries* which confirm both the importance of the topic in the repository of Iamblichus' thought, and the author's awareness in underlining it at the beginning of his works. Indeed, *On the mysteries* likewise begins with an invocation of the gods – it is Hermes that is called forth this time.<sup>19</sup> In addition, even there, when setting up the plan of the discussion, Iamblichus identifies a chain of transmission<sup>20</sup> of divine knowledge that this time lists, along with Pythagoras, also Plato.<sup>21</sup> A clearer scenario seems to unfold; the

<sup>15</sup> Numenius, fr. 14 DP, apud Eus., PE xi 18.15-19, 583c -539a. 'Or ce beau trésor, c'est la belle science (ἐπιστήμη), dont le donataire a bénéficié sans que le donateur soit frustré. C'est ainsi qu'on peut voir une lampe allumée à une autre lampe et porteuse d'une lumière dont elle n'a pas privé la source : sa mère a seulement été allumée à ce feu. De même en est-il pour le trésor de la science [...]. La raison de ce fait, étranger, n'a rien d'humain : c'est que l'essence en possession durable de la science est identique chez le Dieu qui l'a donnée et chez toi et moi qui l'avons reçue. Voilà pourquoi aussi Platon dit que la sagesse (σοφία) est venue aux hommes par Prométhée en même temps que le feu le plus éclairant'. Transl. E. Des Places (1973: 56).

<sup>16</sup> One can think of the myth of Prometheus in general, and of the version reported by Plato in the *Protagoras*, 320d-328d.

<sup>17</sup> In the Academic tradition that inscribes Pythagoras among his members, Heraclides of Pontus needs to be recalled as well. See, e.g. fr. 87 Wehrli (apud Cic. *Tusc.* 5, 8-9), where Pythagoras is credited with being the first person to use the term φιλοσοφία.

<sup>18</sup> Beside the invocation of Hermes (Iambl., *De Myst.* 1, §1), see, e.g. difficulties in setting up the topic (ivi, 1, §4, 1-4), issues to clarify because they have been confused (ivi, 1, §4, 5-9), identification of traditions to address (1, §4, 10 - 5, 1). Very interesting is also Iamblichus' discussion about the innate knowledge of the gods, and about knowledge in general (3, §7-8).

<sup>19</sup> E. C. Clark, J. M. Dillon and J. P. Hershbell (2003: 5 n.2) highlight that the identification of Hermes is voluntarily ambiguous so to keep the reference both to the Greek god and Hermes Trismegistus. Moreover, they also underline that Hermes, in the Hellenistic period, is conceived 'as the interpreter of divine will to humanity' (ibid.).

<sup>20</sup> The word 'chain', besides functioning as a vivid metaphor, also recalls Proclus' revival of the Homeric image of the *golden chain*. Cf. Hom., *Il.* 8, 18-24: εἰ δ' ἄγε πειρήσασθε θεοὶ ἵνα εἴδετε πάντες / σειρήν χρυσεῖην ἐξ οὐρανόθεν κρεμάσαντες / πάντες τ' ἐξάπτεσθε θεοὶ πᾶσαι τε θέαιναι / ἄλλ' οὐκ ἂν ἐρύσαιτ' ἐξ οὐρανόθεν πεδίον δὲ / Ζῆν' ὕπατον μῆστωρ, οὐδ' εἰ μάλα πολλὰ κάμοιτε. / ἄλλ' ὅτε δὴ καὶ ἐγὼ πρόφρων ἐθέλωμι ἐρύσσαι, / αὐτῇ κεν γαίῃ ἐρύσαιμ' αὐτῇ τε θαλάσῃ. See also A. Uždavinys and J. Finamore (2004: xxi): 'In the Athenian school of Syrianus and Proclus, the Homeric image of the Golden Chain (seire chrusē, *Iliad* VIII.18), stretching from Heaven to Earth, was used to describe both the unbroken vertical connection with the first principles (noetic sources of the demiurgic descent, as well as paradigms of the revealed wisdom), and the horizontal, or historical, succession of the qualified masters and interpreters'. Also, it is not a coincidence that J. M. Dillon (1990) chooses the same metaphor to be the title of his collection of papers on the development of Platonism.

<sup>21</sup> Iambl., *De Myst.* 1, §2, 1-7: 'We therefore propose both to transmit to you truthfully our opinion <concerning> the ancestral doctrines of the Assyrians, and to reveal our own views clearly to you, drawing by reasoning some from the innumerable writings of antiquity, and others from *the limited corpus in which*

initial call to the gods justifies a historical presentation of the Pythagorean philosophy that, presented as a divine gift, both ensures the truthfulness of its content and allows the identification of its first representative.

Returning to *VP* §1-2, the second argument for the necessity of a divine invocation is related to the beauty and greatness of this philosophy, that transcends human capacities and consequently asks for the gods' assistance. The elevation and excellence of the Pythagorean philosophy combined with human limits implies a second consequence: this philosophy demands a gradual acquisition. Given that a gradual characterisation of the learning itinerary recurs circularly in some passages of both the *VP*<sup>22</sup> and of the *Protrepticus*,<sup>23</sup> we might consider it to be another key point of Iamblichus' plan. Thirdly, Iamblichus markedly emphasizes alterations and changes that the Pythagorean philosophy suffered over the centuries due to confusion with other doctrines and to the production of apocrypha. It is undeniable that, at Iamblichus' time, contrary to what the author states, Pythagoreanism had drawn a lot of attention; Nicomachus and Apollonius had both written a biography of Pythagoras of which Iamblichus makes extensive use, and Porphyry as well had compiled a *Life of Pythagoras* that the author decided not to use. In addition, the proliferation of pseudepigraphical writings<sup>24</sup> attributed to Pythagorean figures shows the renewed interest in the phenomenon. Besides, the philosopher seems to trust the authenticity of these works. Hence, what is the meaning of

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*the ancients later gathered the totality of their knowledge of things divine.* Yet if you put forward a philosophical question, we will settle this also for you by recourse to the ancient stelae of Hermes, to which Plato before us, and Pythagoras too, gave careful study in the establishment of their philosophy [...]. Transl. by E. C. Clark, J. M. Dillon and J. P. Hershbell (2003: 8).

<sup>22</sup> Iambl., *VP*, §5, 21, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Despite the complexity in identifying Iamblichus' own material within the lines of the *Protrepticus*, we can say that Iamblichus conveys the idea of a gradual progression at least two times in the text (Iambl., *Protr.*, §1, 8, 5 and §21, 105, 23). Indeed, the concept is vehiculated through a double use of Nicomachus' metaphor of the ladder and the bridge (Nicom., *Arithm. introd.* I, III 6), placed both at the very beginning of the text, and at its end: '[...] from this point, probably imperceptibly, we will set ourselves apart from the exoteric conceptions, and we will change course and make ourselves suitable for the technically formulated demonstrations that are proper to this sect, ascending up from below to a summit as if by some bridge or ladder', D. Hutchinson and M. R. Johnson (2015: working translation).

<sup>24</sup> The pseudepigraphical writings attributed to Pythagoreans are collected in H. Thesleff (1965). The major aim of Pythagorean pseudepigrapha seems to be an appropriation and backdating of philosophical (mainly Platonic and Aristotelian) achievements. Recent studies, see, e.g. M. Bonazzi (2013), are also showing the pertinence of these writings within the debates of their times. Iamblichus himself uses diffusely these texts in his treatises and he seems to genuinely trust their authenticity. For a more detailed account of Iamblichus' use of pseudepigraphical texts, see C. Macris (2002). For the reception of these texts in late ancient philosophy, see A. Ulacco (2016, forthcoming). For recent studies on the moral treatises, see B. Centrone (1990). Moreover, in the past few years scholars committed to a better understanding and study of these texts, and conducted a series of international conferences called 'Pseudopythagorica Ateliers' organized by C. Macris and held in Paris.

his claim? I think there is at least one reason to recognise Iamblichus' claim as legitimate: the rejection of any alteration of the Pythagorean doctrine in favour of a (at least) formal recall of the original and ancient tradition is effective for the construction of a new Pythagorean identity. With this move, Iamblichus states the priority of restoring the Pythagorean philosophy in its truthfulness, and prepares the ground for the following books of his collection. At last, Iamblichus identifies Pythagoras as a guide, and crowns him with the role of 'founder and father of the divine philosophy'.

To sum up what we analysed thus far, we can divide the structure of *VP* §1-2 into four sections.

Section 1 (*VP* 1, §1, 1-6) presents the invocation of the gods, justified by the fact that Pythagorean philosophy was handed down from the gods to Pythagoras himself. This first step validates the existence of chain of transmission of wisdom and assures the truthfulness and elevation of its content.

Section 2 (*VP* 1 §1, 6 - §2, 1) maintains that the primary domain of the Pythagorean philosophy is divine. Due to human limitations, the comprehension of this philosophy requires the gods' assistance and a gradual acquisition. This second step advances the necessity of contact with the gods and, therefore, of theurgy. Moreover, these lines set the ground for the next books that will gradually introduce Pythagorean philosophy.

Section 3 (*VP* 1, §2, 1-8) mentions the production of pseudepigraphical writings and the obscurity that Pythagorean philosophy has suffered in recent times. This step is the crucial one. On the one hand, these lines certify that the Pythagoreanism presented by Iamblichus is the original one given by the gods to Pythagoras; on the other hand, the lines allow the philosopher to move forward with his project of constructing a new Pythagorean identity.

Section 4 (*VP* 1 §2, 8-14) invests Pythagoras with the title of 'father and founder of the divine philosophy'. As we will see shortly, this formulation will be revealed to be crucial as well.

## 1.2. *Aristotle's presentation of Thales*

The second section of this paper takes into consideration some passages of *Metaphysics A*, in which Aristotle discusses Thales. At first glance, one might question



this comparison, but there are three reasons why it holds. The first two relates to how we are to approach interpreting programmatic passages regarding the origins of philosophy. Firstly, this Aristotelian account of the origins of philosophy is usually considered the most influential in antiquity and today; and secondly, any description of the origins of philosophy, far from only being a fascinating and controversial issue, always involves important decisions and consequences. Different definitions of philosophy will involve very different *πρῶτοι εὑρεταί*.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the choice of a *first founder* is strongly determined by the kind of philosophy one wants to define. Aristotle, in *Metaphysics A* seems to have this principle very clear: he qualifies his predecessors' theories as simple, ingenuous and unsatisfactory, but identifies in them the first and middle steps towards the accomplishment of his own theory of the four causes.

Lastly, the third reason is textual. The formulation used by Iamblichus to invest Pythagoras with the role of 'father and founder of the divine philosophy' closely recalls the expression used by Aristotle to invest Thales with the role of 'founder of this kind of philosophy'.<sup>26</sup> This gives at least an incentive to look at the two texts together considering the possibility that they may have some affiliation.<sup>27</sup>

In the inquiry for the ἀρχὴ τῶν ὄντων,<sup>28</sup> Aristotle says that it is Thales who is responsible for the very first impulse towards philosophy. As noted before, this quest for the founder of philosophy is affected by the object of the enquiry, that is the ἀρχὴ τῶν ὄντων.<sup>29</sup> Aristotle's intention, in fact, is to establish that the first philosophers classified the origin of all things according to material elements. Among those, Thales, ὁ τῆς

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<sup>25</sup> Extremely pertinent is, here, L. Zhmud's section on *πρῶτοι εὑρεταί* (2012: 23-29). The research for a first founder represents, as the scholar shows, a sort of prehistory of the history of science. It is around the late 5<sup>th</sup> century that 'the search for *prōtoi heuretai* obviously acquires a new dimension, which is reflected in systematic attempts to create both a general theory of the origin of culture and the history of individual τέχναι' (2012: 43). It is in this frame that we need to understand Aristotle's account.

<sup>26</sup> Arist., *Metaph.* A 3, 983 b20-21.

<sup>27</sup> As the aim of the present paper is to identify possible relations between Iamblichus' and Aristotle's accounts, it will not be possible to provide a detailed analysis of *Metaphysics A*. Indeed, all the passages will be examined in view of an understanding of the relations between the two texts. For recent accounts of *Metaphysics A*'s interpretations and scholarly readings, see L. Cardullo (2013).

<sup>28</sup> Obviously, the one reported here is the Aristotelian formulation. It is plausible that Thales, as the Milesians who were his contemporaries, questioned the issue of a generative substance, rather than a substratum permanent to the transformation of things: ἐξ οὗ would need to be considered in the perspective of an origin of things. As it is known, the notion of a substratum that endures unchanged to the variations of changing, is properly Aristotelian. See M. M. Sassi (2009: 56-57).

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle himself, indeed, gives very different presentations of Thales according to the different texts one takes into account. See, e.g., Arist., *Politics* 1, 11 1259 a5-19 (=Th. 28 McKirahan) where the anecdote of the olive crops shows Thales' practical wisdom; Arist., *NE*, 6, 7 1141b2-8 (=Th. 27 McKirahan) where Aristotle distinguishes practical and philosophical wisdom, assigning this last to Thales and Anaxagoras.

τοιαύτης ἀρχηγὸς φιλοσοφίας (the founder of this kind of philosophy), identified the first principle as water. Aristotle also reports, with a qualified statement, the reasons for Thales' deduction. By seeing 'that the nutriment of all things is moist', 'that heat itself is generated from the moist and kept alive by it', and 'from the fact that the seeds of all things have a moist nature, and that water is the origin of the nature of moist things',<sup>30</sup> he concluded water to be, in Aristotelian terms, the material source of all things. What is interesting to us, however, is the following sentence. Aristotle says that according to some (τινες), *also* the 'ancients who lived long before the present generation', the first who made discourses about the gods (οἱ πρῶτοι θεολογήσαντες)<sup>31</sup>, identified the origins of all things within water.<sup>32</sup> In what respect, then, is Thales different? What features, according to Aristotle, trace a distinction between philosophy and poetry and religion? How can we differentiate Thales's thought from the ancients'? In order to establish this, Aristotle's lines are crucial:

εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀρχαία τις αὕτη καὶ παλαιὰ τετύχηκεν οὔσα περὶ τῆς φύσεως ἢ δόξα, τάχ' ἂν ἄδηλον εἴη, Θαλῆς μὲντοι λέγεται οὕτως ἀποφύνασθαι περὶ τῆς πρώτης αἰτίας'.<sup>33</sup>

I here give two different options for translation.

- a. It may perhaps be uncertain whether this opinion about nature is primitive and ancient, but Thales at any rate is said to have declared himself thus about the first cause.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Arist., *Metaph.* A 3, 983 b19-28. Transl. by W. D. Ross (1953<sup>3</sup>: 7).

<sup>31</sup> Arist., *Metaph.* A 3 983 b29-984 a4. Transl. by W. D. Ross (1953<sup>3</sup>: *ibid*).

<sup>32</sup> To facilitate the reading, I quote the integral passage in Greek, followed by Ross' translation of the first paragraph. εἰσὶ δέ τινες οἳ καὶ τοὺς παμπαλαίους καὶ πολὺ πρὸ τῆς νῦν γενέσεως καὶ πρώτους θεολογήσαντας οὕτως οἶονται περὶ τῆς φύσεως ὑπολαβεῖν· Ὡκεανόν τε γὰρ καὶ Τηθὺν ἐποίησαν τῆς γενέσεως πατέρας, καὶ τὸν ὄρον τῶν θεῶν ὕδωρ, τὴν καλουμένην ὑπ' αὐτῶν Στύγα [τῶν ποιητῶν]· τιμιώτατον μὲν γὰρ τὸ πρεσβύτατον ἐστίν. εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀρχαία τις αὕτη καὶ παλαιὰ τετύχηκεν οὔσα περὶ τῆς φύσεως ἢ δόξα, τάχ' ἂν ἄδηλον εἴη, Θαλῆς μὲντοι λέγεται οὕτως ἀποφύνασθαι περὶ τῆς πρώτης αἰτίας [...]. Arist., *Metaph.* A 3 983b 27-984a 3. 'Some think that the ancients who lived long before the present generation, and first framed accounts of the gods, had a similar view of nature; for they made Ocean and Tethys the parents of creation, and described the oath of the gods as being by water, which they themselves call Styx; for what is oldest is most honourable, and the most honourable thing is that by which one swears', W. D. Ross (1953<sup>3</sup>: *ibid*).

<sup>33</sup> Arist., *Metaph.* A 3, 983b 34-984a 3.

<sup>34</sup> Transl. by W. D. Ross (1953<sup>3</sup>: 7). I cannot avoid the reference to two other influent Italian translations, namely those of G. Giannantoni and G. Reale. On the one hand, Giannantoni (2004<sup>8</sup>: 90), DK11 A12, follows the same direction of Ross ('Se dunque questa visione della natura sia in verità antica e primitiva potrebbe essere dubbio, ma Talete senz'altro si dice che abbia descritto la prima causa in questo modo'); on the other hand, Reale's translation (1993: 17) is slightly different ('Ma che questa concezione della realtà naturale sia stata così originaria e così antica, non risulta affatto in modo chiaro; al contrario, si afferma che

b. Well, whether this really is a primeval and ancient view about nature, might well be unclear; however, at least as far as Thales is concerned, people say that he expressed himself in this way about the first cause.<sup>35</sup>

The translations convey two very different meanings.<sup>36</sup> The meaning and translation of the second part of the sentence, in fact, depends upon and is conditioned by the translation of the principal clause. On the one hand, indeed, what is unclear is whether this opinion about nature is primitive and ancient (transl. a). On the other hand, what is unclear is whether this opinion, that is primitive and ancient, happen to be dealing with nature (transl. b).

According to translation a., Aristotle refers to ancient interpreters (τινές) who believed that, thanks to an allegorical reading, speculative elements could be found in theogonic poetry as well.<sup>37</sup> For some reason, Aristotle doesn't trust the sources. Accordingly, the only thing he can affirm with some degree of reliability<sup>38</sup> is that it was Thales who actually identified the first principle with water. As a result, the acknowledgment of

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Talete per primo abbia professato questa dottrina intorno alla causa prima'). The difference between the two translations is played essentially by the translation of the second clause. While Giannantoni's translation states that Thales described the first cause in this way, Reale pushes the interpretation by saying that Thales was the first to profess this doctrine about the first cause. For the sake of completeness, I add that, in translating the passage, also C. A. Russo (1973 :13, 'Se, però, una siffatta opinione sulla natura sia davvero primitiva ed antica, non si può dire con certezza; di Taletе, invece, si dice che in tal senso egli ha parlato della prima causa') and A. Viano (1974: 190 'Se questa credenza sulla natura sia originaria e antica è forse dubbio, ma si dice che Taletе abbia detto qualcosa di simile parlando della causa prima') follow the same direction.

<sup>35</sup> Transl. By A. Lacks and G. W. Most (2016: 261). W. K. C. Guthrie (1962: 55-6: 'whether this view of nature is in fact ancient and primitive must perhaps remain in doubt'), The Revised Oxford Translation (1984) ('it may perhaps be uncertain whether this opinion about nature is primitive and ancient') and, more explicitly, E. Berti (2017: 15, 'Se dunque questa sia stata <realmente> un'opinione arcaica e antica intorno alla natura, è forse oscuro, tuttavia si dice che Taletе si sia espresso in questo modo a proposito della causa prima') and M. M. Sassi in her book on the origins of philosophy (2009: 56: 'Ma è poco chiaro se questa opinione, in qualche modo venerabile e antica si sia trovata a vertere intorno alla natura: fatto sta che Taletе si dice che si sia espresso precisamente così intorno alla causa prima'), follow the same direction.

<sup>36</sup> In any case, the translation of the lines remains controversial since the function of the initial τις, often neglected in the translations, is not clear. Since I leave to pure philologists the discussion about a secure translation and the comparative and detailed analysis of manuscripts, I can only say that a potential solution could be found by substituting τις αὐτή with τοσαύτη. Indeed, this option would simplify the translation of the first clause. As J. A. Palmer (2003: 185 n.6) recalls, J. Mansfeld (1985: 115ff.) draws the attention on the usual confusion in the translation of these lines.

<sup>37</sup> M. M. Sassi (2009: 58).

<sup>38</sup> Or, at least, it looks like this is what he wants us to be persuaded with, in this text. In any case, Aristotle's testimony about Thales is very cautious; the use of formulas such as, e.g. ἴσως, seem to imply that the information gathered by Aristotle rely mainly (or, probably, exclusively) on oral tradition.

Thales as the first philosopher partially derives from a lack of trustworthiness for the sources claiming that the same claims were attested to the poets as well. As it is doubtful whether ancient authors believed the origin of all things to derive from water, we can only ascribe this assertion to Thales.

Conversely, translation b. places greater authority in the first sentence. It is indeed not clear if the opinions expressed by the poets explicitly regarded nature, while Thales' statements certainly did. According to this second translation, Aristotle's interpretive procedure is significantly more decisive. The Stagirite separates Thales from all the previous wise figures of the past by attributing to the philosopher (and *as* a philosopher) the absolute credit of a first and conscious formulation about nature. In this case, Thales is responsible for a clear definition of the area of interest and of the field of inquiry. Even though one might glimpse a certain image and vision of nature underneath the Homeric images and language as well, the interpretive operation needed in order to identify them reveals the vagueness and unawareness of those expressions. Therefore, these texts didn't speak clearly in this regard.<sup>39</sup> Thales' innovation, then, would regard his method, his explanatory clarity, and, most of all, his consciousness of the area of research and of the questions addressed. As a philosopher, he was the first to argue in favour of his hypotheses, adducing reasons, applying an empirical procedure, freeing himself from mythological references and addressing his questions to a specific field that he identified with nature.

I am inclined to accept the second translation and interpretation for several reasons, both grammatical and interpretive.

Firstly, in the previous lines Aristotle has reported the opinion of others.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, in the last sentences, he expresses his own, suggesting he is distancing himself from the statements previously presented. Secondly, precisely by using the formulation 'τοὺς θεολογήσαντας' to speak about the ancients, Aristotle distinctly differentiates the area of expertise of those from that of Thales.<sup>41</sup> Thirdly, we might find a textual indication, even

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<sup>39</sup> M. M. Sassi (2009: 58-59).

<sup>40</sup> The source is probably to be recognised in a sophistic text written by Hippias and exploited also by Plato in the *Cratylus*, cf. B. Snell (1944: 170-182).

<sup>41</sup> For a more detailed account on the passage and on Aristotle relationship with the 'theologians', see J. A. Palmer (2003) and J. Mansfeld (2103).

if feeble, that leads us in the direction of this reading. The verb ἀποφαίνω, which frequently takes a direct object rather than a verbal complement,<sup>42</sup> makes the translation of the second clause, ‘declared himself thus about the first cause’, very close to the Greek. Consequently, the sentence would mean that Thales expressed himself thus in relation to the first cause (and, therefore, finding it in the domain of nature), rather than that he described the first cause in this way, just as Aristotle presented. Therefore, by interpreting the second clause in this way, the main clause would convey a qualified statement of Aristotle, related to the fact that the ancients actually did the same, and identified nature with the field of their enquiry. Thales, then, needs to be explicitly singled out and credited as the first philosopher for his conscious recognition and acknowledgment of an appropriate domain of research: φύσις.

### 1.3 *Philosophical investitures in comparison*

At this point, it is legitimate to ask for what reason, in the context of Iamblichus’ investiture of Pythagoras, we ought to adduce Aristotle’s testimony on Thales.

On the one hand, the evidence is interesting because, contrary to Aristotle’s interpretive direction in describing Thales - that is to differentiate the philosopher from other authoritative figures - both the sources on Pythagoras and Thales seem to be oriented exactly in the opposite way. On the other hand, it is striking that Iamblichus, while associating Pythagoras consistently with the interpretive direction of such sources, recognises the success of Aristotle’s strategy and decides to adopt it with an opposed interpretive direction. These two aspects need a parallel consideration.

Aristotle’s presentation suggests a strong attempt to distinguish Thales’s procedures and statements both from those of the Seven Sages,<sup>43</sup> with whom he is often associated

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. LSJ B. II. 2, ἀποφαίνω, where, listed, there are many examples of the absolute use of the verb in the sense of expressing an opinion with reference to something.

<sup>43</sup> The testimonies on Thales, both previous and contemporary to Aristotle, often connect Thales with the Seven Sages or praise his practical knowledge. See, among many, Th. 2-5 McKirahan, that attest connections between Thales and Pherecydes; Th. 10-13 McKirahan, where Herodotus mentions Thales’ prediction of the eclipse and Thales’ explanation of the Nile’s flooding; fr. 32 Wehrli (=Th. 36 McKirahan), where Dicaearchus is said to have identified Thales, Bias and Pittacus as universally included among the Seven Sages; Plut., *Sol.* 4.7.80e (=Th. 37 McKirahan), dealing with Theophrastus’ account of the tripod legend, sent to Bias first, and then to Thales; Th. 200 and 247 McKirahan, where the maxim ‘know thyself’ is said to be originated with Thales; etc. One famous exception of this tendency is the anecdote of the well (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 172 b - 177c), where Thales’ lack of practical wisdom exemplifies the philosophical

by late sources, and from those mysterious and legendary wisdom figures of the past such as Orpheus, Musaeus, Epimenides, Aristaeus and Pherecydes, usually named among the teachers of Pythagoras. Thanks to Aristotle's operation, the presentation of Thales works as a device to distinguish the field of philosophy proper. Together with a *πρῶτος εὐρετής*, the germinal foundations of the (Aristotelian) philosophical method are also delineated.

At the same time, the way in which Pythagoras is described by the sources<sup>44</sup> almost from the beginning<sup>45</sup> seems to reflect the same manoeuvre in the reverse. Starting from biographical details, his personality is identified as outstanding.<sup>46</sup> The surviving biographies report, together with the *τόπος* of the journeys from Egypt to India<sup>47</sup> in which Pythagoras obtains knowledge from the wisdom practitioners of these respective cultures, specific details regarding his phenomenal capacities, exceptional physical appearance, clothing and family. For no other classical figure are so many details related to his physical person and relationships attested: Pythagoras is in fact not an ordinary Pre-Socratic. Contrary to the place Aristotle carves out for Thales, Pythagoras seems to be brought back, in the reception of his character, to that vague boundary between scientific inquiry and mythological element. He seems to be typologically similar precisely to those

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life. Nevertheless, other Platonic dialogues (*Protagoras* 342 e4 -343 b7; *Republic* 600 a 4-7) list Thales among the Seven Sages or acclaim his practical wisdom.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g. DK 14 A7, in which the fabulous anecdotes about Pythagoras are preserved. Pythagoras is said to have predicted the presence of a dead man in a ship before the ship reaches the harbour; to have been greeted by a river; to have been seen in two places at the same time; etc; DK 14 A 8, that attests connection with Pherecydes and hands down the story of Pythagoras' multiple reincarnations. It is in this interpretive current that Iamblichus decides to inscribe himself. By promoting an inverse application of the Aristotelian operation, Iamblichus manages in fact to reclaim, with a very powerful procedure, the field of theurgy as an essential part of philosophy.

<sup>45</sup> Although the number of ancient sources is extremely scant (among the most ancient we can list Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Ion of Chios), some lines of Ion of Chios (DK 36 A B4) already present an encomiastic image of Pythagoras living after death. According to C. Riedweg (2005: 52-53), the lines are a response to Heraclitus' polemical account of Pythagoras (DK 22 B 129).

<sup>46</sup> With C. Riedweg (2005: 5), 'A man so far above the average cannot have an ordinary career-so much is required independent of any question of fact, merely by the literary rules of hagiographic narratives'.

<sup>47</sup> The *τόπος* of the journeys in the Orient is attributed to most of the wise figures of Greece; indeed, both Pythagoras' and Thales' biographies share this feature. Particularly pertinent is L. Zhmud's sub-chapter on 'Inventors and imitators. Greece and Orient' (2006: 34-44). The scholar outlines an exhaustive account of the history of science and identifies heurematography as its forerunner. As Zhmud says: 'All discoveries not attributed to gods and in want of authors may be said to have fallen into two groups: indigenous and borrowed. The foreign inventors, apart from such 'personalities' as Busiris, Cadmus, or Anacharsis, remained as a rule anonymous, their names being of little interest, while the Greek *prōtoi heuretai* tended to be personified [...]. This prevailing scheme implies that the Greeks were ready to admit their substantial debt to their Oriental neighbours' (2006: 41). In addition, it must be said that Isocrates, in line with Herodotus (DK 14 A1-2), also attests the connection of the philosopher with Egypt (Isocr., *Bus.*, 23, 28). Indeed, these connections appear to be old and to precede the Platonic tradition in which Iamblichus inscribed himself. In this regard, see P. S. Horky (2013: 92-94).

personalities hardly able to be situated in time and space, such as Orpheus, Musaeus, Epimenides, Aristaeus and Pherecydes.

I believe that the decisive step in securing an image of a non-φυσιόλογος Pythagoras is performed by Iamblichus' intervention.<sup>48</sup> To build a new history of philosophy and to choose Pythagoras as its founder<sup>49</sup> has, in fact, according to his logic, a specific function: a precise re-location of the discipline of philosophy. With it, Iamblichus manages to encompass fields that, in order to be identified with and connected to philosophy, needed a legitimate rationale. It is a conscious move that shares with Aristotle its intentions, namely the justification of his own thought and doctrines, but not its prerogatives, which are indeed rooted in very different fields and areas of research. The Iamblichean strategy is quite clear: to find a space in which to ground and validate a new foundation of Pythagoreanism with its own peculiar characteristics by referring it to its divine and *authentic* origins. At this point, Pythagoras is *de facto* invested with the role of *father and founder of the divine philosophy*, with a formulation that is suspiciously close to the one used by Aristotle with reference to Thales. Pythagoras is, in fact, ὁ ἀρχηγὸς καὶ πατὴρ τῆς θείας φιλοσοφίας, just like the Milesian philosopher was ὁ τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρχηγὸς φιλοσοφίας. The substantial difference, here, is indicated by Iamblichus' addition of the adjective θεῖος,<sup>50</sup> divine, which, in Iamblichus' perspective, intimately refers to the Pythagorean doctrines and philosophy. But Iamblichus' strategy goes even further. By exploiting the same pattern provided by Aristotle, he not only encompasses the divine within the highest domain of philosophy, but also gives legitimacy to the embracing of theurgy as philosophy's essential and necessary counterpart. Pythagoras becomes indeed

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<sup>48</sup> It is true that Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism, in advance of the fascination exercised on the Chalcidean philosopher, had caught the curiosity of his contemporaries first, and of Plato and the Academy later. See, among many possible examples, e.g.; the accusation of plagiarism addressed to Plato (see Diog. Laert., viii, 84); the title of Aristotle's (Diog. Laert., v, 25, 347ff. Περὶ τῆς Ἀρχυτείου φιλοσοφίας; Τὰ ἐκ τοῦ Τιμαίου καὶ τῶν Ἀρχυτείων; Πρὸς τοὺς Πυθαγορείους; Περὶ τῶν Πυθαγορείων) and Xenocrates' (Diog. Laert., iv, 13, 123 Πυθαγόρεια) book; Moderatus and Nicomachus' efforts in harmonising Plato's lineage with the Pythagoreans (e.g. Moderatus apud Simpl., *In Phys.* 230.34-231.24).

<sup>49</sup> We must recall that the first use of the term ἀρχηγός with reference to Pythagoras is to be found in Heraclitus (DK 22 B81). However, in the fragment the term is used with a negative meaning: ἀρχηγός κοπίδων, chief of the glib speakers.

<sup>50</sup> Curiously, θεῖος is also the epithet reserved for Iamblichus by later philosophers. David's sentence in his commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge* works as an emblematic example: ἐνθους ὁ Σύρος, πολυμαθὴς ὁ Φοίνιξ, inspired, the Sirian (Iamblichus); erudite, the Phoenician (Porphyry), David, *In Porph.*, 92.2-7. Moreover, if the two formulations are observed in parallel, the adjective θεῖος occupies the same position of τοιαύτης. This slight change implies huge consequences for the relocation of philosophy, that receives a definite and explicitly expressed domain.

the possessor of that wisdom that has as its object not only the gods, but also those intelligible entities that are incomprehensible within human limits. Pythagoras embodies in his figure both philosophical knowledge and that intellectual territory which needs the theurgic practice in order to be grasped. It is to the Pythagorean declension of philosophy alone<sup>51</sup> that Iamblichus ascribes a decisive role: the intermediary and propedeutic role for the apprehension of the intelligible universe, inaccessible to discursive and dianoetic thought.

#### 1.4 *Testing these results*

Could it be that the resemblances within the two formulations are just accidentally parallel? I think that some passages of *VP* allow us at least to surmise that Iamblichus is actively engaging with Aristotle's presentation of Thales. Indeed, Pythagoras' investiture does not seem to end with the first paragraphs of *The Pythagorean life*, but it accompanies the whole book as a *Leitmotiv*.<sup>52</sup>

After the biographical information related about Pythagoras' family, Iamblichus devotes a long section of his work to describe the Samian's education and intellectual development. It is precisely in this section that Iamblichus places the τόπος of Pythagoras' journeys, shared by the philosopher with most of the wise figures of Ancient Greece. It must be pointed out that Iamblichus pays a lot of attention to building, through the references to Pythagoras' masters, an intellectual nucleus proper to the Pythagorean philosophy.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the foundations of Iamblichus' Pythagoreanism are laid precisely in the presentation of the father and founder of divine philosophy: Pythagoras. The Samian formation is initially encouraged by his father Mnemarchus, who delegates it to Creophilus and Pherecydes and to 'almost all who were experts in divine matters'.<sup>54</sup> In this way, he hopes his son 'might be taught thoroughly and sufficiently about divine matters as much as is humanly possible'.<sup>55</sup> It is now clear that the reference to the divine

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<sup>51</sup> At least as long as one takes into account the books of *On Pythagoreanism*.

<sup>52</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the contents of *VP*, see J. M. Dillon and J. Hershbell (1991: 1-29), M. Giangiulio (1991: 32-41), L. Brisson and A. P. Segonds (2011: vii-lix). See also D. O'Meara (1990: 35-40).

<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, the context does not allow a full analysis of the *VP*'s structure. For a more exhaustive examination of the architecture, arrangement and plan of the *VP*, I refer to C. Macris (2009).

<sup>54</sup> Iambl., *VP*, §2, 9, 6, transl. by J. M. Dillon and J. Hershbell (1991: 37).

<sup>55</sup> Ivi, §2, 9, 7-8.



is of prime importance: Pythagoras' provenance and the abilities derived from his divine origin,<sup>56</sup> necessitate anything but the sacred as the essential and fundamental background on which to lay the foundations of the remaining doctrines.

Once the philosopher has been educated by these wise men, his name reaches Miletus. It must be noted that Pythagoras' own will seldom compels him on his journeys and drives him to complete his education. Rather, it is his fame that compels him onward, the causal conditions,<sup>57</sup> or, we could say, some sort of divine providence. With an abrupt passage and some incongruence, Iamblichus affirms that at the age of eighteen, because of Polycrates' tyranny, Pythagoras had to embark secretly in the direction of Syrus first, to join Pherecydes, and later to Miletus, to join Anaximander and Thales. The education of Pythagoras, at this point, is enriched with a new and crucial detail: Ionic philosophy. In particular, it is to Thales that Iamblichus dedicates so many lines. Thales, as well as immediately noticing the evident exceptionality of his new disciple, encourages him to meet the Egyptian priests, as he had done previously. The passing of the torch from Thales to Pythagoras is celebrated by an admission of Thales.

‘And what is more, Thales gladly accepted him as a student, and admired his difference from other youths. Because it was greater and exceeded the reputation that already preceded him, (Thales) gave whatever lessons he could. But then, giving as an excuse his own old age and weakness, (Thales) urged him to sail to Egypt, and especially to meet with the priests in Memphis and Diospolis. For it was by these, he said, that he himself had been provided with the very things in virtue of which the multitude believed he was wise. Indeed, Thales said that he himself had gained neither by nature nor by training so many privileges as he saw in Pythagoras. Hence, he could proclaim nothing but good news: if Pythagoras associated with the priests, he would be most divine, and wisest beyond all humans’.<sup>58</sup>

This passage is crucial to our understanding of Iamblichus' investiture of Pythagoras. First of all, Thales' admission displays his explicit acknowledgment of Pythagoras' absolute superiority. Secondly, this acknowledgment is expressed by one of the wisest sages of Ancient Greece himself, and precisely by the one Aristotle identified as the first

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<sup>56</sup> D. O'Meara (1990: 37-39) shows how Iamblichus, at the beginning of *VP*, presents Pythagoras in line with the myth of the Phaedrus, so to justify the divine origins of his soul. I subscribe the final comment of the scholar: 'In short, *On the Pythagorean Life* is a protreptic to Pythagorean philosophy through an illustration of the spiritual credentials of the founder of that philosophy' (ivi, p. 39).

<sup>57</sup> E.g., it is his reputation that spreads abroad to the Sages (*VP*, 2, §11), Polycrates' tyranny that forces him to leave (ibid.), Thales' suggestion that guides him to Egypt (ivi, §12).

<sup>58</sup> Iambl., *VP* §2, 12, 4-17., transl. by J. M. Dillon and J. Hershbell (1991: 39).

philosopher. Iamblichus invests Pythagoras with the significant role of the wisest and most divine of all men, and he manages, by means of this narrative expedient, to incorporate the natural philosophy of the Milesians into the divine sphere that primarily belonged to Pythagoras. At the same time, he obtains to ennoble such recognition and to make it reliable by having it be pronounced by Thales.<sup>59</sup>

The passage renews Pythagoras' investiture expressed by Iamblichus in the first lines of *VP* and establishes a new relationship with Milesian philosophy. It is once again Thales who is the reference point chosen by Iamblichus for comparison with Pythagoras. If the allusion to Aristotle's formulation in the first lines of *VP* was not explicit,<sup>60</sup> this second and now direct and repeated comparison with Thales makes us at least suspect that Iamblichus was consciously engaging with Aristotle's presentation in *Metaphysics*. This second acknowledgment, in fact, serves on the one hand to reinforce Pythagoras' status, and, on the other hand, to state the superiority of Pythagoreanism by including the study of nature in a field that is primarily connoted as divine. In doing so, Iamblichus is able to establish, in the person of Pythagoras, a constitutional link (though still implicit) between two domains that are strictly interconnected and interdependent in his thought: theology (together with its practical application, theurgy) and the study of nature. This link, and this first connotation of Pythagoreanism, continues to be enriched in the subsequent passages, where Pythagoras' education is described. What was initially a correlation in fact starts to define an actual and precisely designed network of sciences. The first place is given to the ritual and cult which the Samian philosopher constantly cultivates during his travels: next, in order, knowledge about natural philosophy, astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, music. On closer inspection, the stratified wisdom that Iamblichus built for Pythagoras seems to reflect the topics of his enormous treatise as well.

### *Conclusions*

From the first lines, the Iamblican project shows how deeply strategic the plan of its author is and how every single part contributes to a homogeneous result, well-defined

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<sup>59</sup> If this was not sufficient, Thales also underlines that it is the multitude who believes in his wisdom and exceptionality that, indeed, he does not recognize. The philosopher admits that all his experience and knowledge was achieved thanks to the priests. On the contrary, Pythagoras' exceptionality is acknowledged by Thales himself.

<sup>60</sup> And, unfortunately, cannot be demonstrated decisively.

from the beginning. In this respect, the presentation of Pythagoras performs a fundamental role of primary importance: it works as the basis on which Iamblichus fulfils his purpose of constructing a new identity for Pythagoreanism – and for philosophy. To fulfil this purpose, Iamblichus shapes the description of Pythagoras in a way that intimately recalls Aristotle's description of Thales, but that, at the same time, deviates from its model. Indeed, in order to have a renewed Pythagoreanism that embraces both the theoretical and theurgical dimension, the field of philosophy needs to be relocated and legitimated. The counterpart of this manoeuvre is found in Thales, and, more precisely, in the description that Aristotle gives of him. Although Iamblichus' awareness in challenging Aristotle cannot be assessed conclusively, the similarity between the two formulations and the renovated investiture of the *VP* provide elements enough for a plausible supposition. If this is true, Iamblichus' strategy would be revealed to be very incisive. By reinforcing the significance of the original Aristotelian account, he exploits Aristotle's own argumentative strategy by adapting it to his own purposes. Unfortunately for him, Iamblichus' account of the origins of philosophy hasn't proven to be as decisive as that of Aristotle. Nevertheless, each version demonstrates the level to which each philosopher would invest his own historical speculations with philosophical conviction. Iamblichus thus reveals his true Aristotelian heritage.

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